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WORLD TRADE CENTER TASK FORCE INTERVIEW

LIEUTENANT BRENDAN WHELAN

Interview Date: October 17, 2001

Transcribed by Laurie A. Collins

MR. CASTORINA: The time is 11:33. I'm
at Engine 35. My name is Ron Castorina.

Your name is?

MR. McCOURT: Tom McCourt.

MR. CASTORINA: We are conducting an
interview with --

Your name, sir, and your rank?

LIEUTENANT WHELAN: BRENDAN WHELAN,
Lieutenant, 35 Engine.

Q. Lieutenant Whelan, on September 11th,
2001, on that particular day, can you tell us
what your assignment was and the events that took
place that morning?

A. Yes. Actually my crew was getting off
at 9:00 that morning because the day tour had an
educational day over at Randall's Island. I was
sitting actually having breakfast with Battalion
Chief Scheffold and Marchbanks, who are missing,
at about 8:30 that morning.

The first plane came in approximately a
quarter to 9. When we saw what was happening, we
were pretty much in utter disbelief. I had
mentioned to Joe Marchbanks, who was going to be
the BC for the day tour that day, I told him that

I was going to hold my crew over because 35 Engine wasn't going to be manned because of educational day. He okayed that.

As we continued to watch the TV, the next thing we saw the second plane go in. When the second plane hit, actually Joe and Freddie both responded to that. I believe it was a fifth alarm that was sent in for that building. They had two individual fifth alarms set up for each building. They rolled on that, and I let everybody know that they were going to be staying over and that we were probably going to be responding to the trade towers.

After the second plane had hit, the dispatcher had notified us that we were going to be a staging area for Bronx companies. In the interim I told all the guys to go down and empty out our tool room because I was pretty sure that all of the tools from every fire house were going to be needed down there.

As the guys were bringing up all of the tools, we were getting all our foam together. Any kind of equipment we could get together we got together and ready on the apparatus board

floor for the other companies coming in from the Bronx. I know 64 Engine came in, 60 Engine, 94 Engine, I think 83 Engine, and I don't know who else came.

Be a quarter after 10, 20 after 10, we were dispatched down on the fifth alarm for the second tower to be hit. We all kind of responded down in a convoy, all the engine companies from the Bronx and ourselves. We responded down to the Trade Center.

We made relatively quick time. On the way down we were about maybe two or three minutes out from where we were told to report. We were told to report at West and Vesey Street for a staging area there. On the way down we heard the upper collapse of the first building.

That's probably one of the things that I'll never forget, because after the initial collapse there was total silence on the radios, the department radio. The next thing, members that were trapped in vehicles were screaming over their handsets. I'll never forget that.

A couple guys were saying that they were trapped, they were buried, they couldn't

breathe, they were running out of air. It was pretty eerie to hear that over the department radio, something that I never thought I would hear and I never want to hear again. Who those members were, I don't know. What their outcome was, I don't know.

When I heard the dispatcher's reaction to it, I realized everybody that had heard those transmissions thought they were going into hell, basically. My biggest concern is where we were going and what the outcome was going to be at the end of all this.

I had our extra Chief Ferran. He hopped on my rig. One of the other lieutenants from 35 Engine, he actually hopped on the rig, Lieutenant MikeHadden. He hopped on too.

They didn't hear the transmission in the back, of the collapse. I didn't realize the collapse was the whole building. I thought some of the facade had fallen off. It would never occur to me that the whole building came down.

We immediately got out of the rig. I rechecked my BF4, and I put Lieutenant Hadden and Chief Ferran on it. Who else? Actually Mike

Carter from the UFA, he bumped into us as we were getting into out. He wanted to team up with us. He's an ex-member of 35 Engine. I put him on my BF4 also.

I went to the staging area, which was West and Vesey, and I didn't see any chief there at the time. I guess with all the confusion of the first collapse people were scattered all over the place.

When we got there, the whole area was covered in smoke and soot from the first building. At this point I still didn't realize the whole building had collapsed, because I thought my vision was pretty obscured.

Q. Where were you at this point?

A. West and Vesey.

I told my guys to put their gear down while I went to look for a chief. At that point MikeHadden and Mark Ferran, they had one radio between them. They said they were going to move going to the area.

One of the funny things was -- I don't know if you'd want to say it was funny. But I remember looking up at the building and seeing

the volume of fire that was in the building, and I grabbed Mark Ferran by his turnout coat and I pulled him at me and I said, "You know what, Chief, we're in a collapse zone here." He looked at me and he said, "That's not coming down."

I thought maybe the floors that were burning would collapse on themselves and that would be it and debris might be shot out from the building. I never thought the whole thing would come down.

Q. You still didn't see that the other building was gone?

A. I thought it was totally obscured from my view, because I was focused in on that one building. I hadn't really been down at the trade towers too many times in my life, to be honest with you. I thought it was behind that building.

From seeing the amount of fire that was in that building, that's what I thought was going to happen was the top would basically collapse on the fire floors and that would pretty much be it and whatever debris from that would be shooting out from the sides of the building.

So Mark Ferran and MikeHadden turned

to walk up the street. We moved up just a little, maybe about another hundred paces. I was looking to report in to the staging area, and we couldn't find the staging area at this point.

Within 45 seconds you heard the building start to buckle. I looked up in total amazement. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. The next thing, I could see the top floors basically imploding all the way down.

Q. How close were you at this point?

A. We were probably 100, 150 feet from Six World Trade. As it started to come down, my first reaction was -- I was looking at the building. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. I turned, all my guys were standing there, and I screamed at them to run.

We had had all our rollups, our bags, and we actually had a couple of the extra cylinders there. My probie said -- I saw him go down to start grabbing the equipment, and I said, "What are you doing?" He's said, "I'm going to grab --" I said just run.

We started to make our way up the West Side Highway, and as we were running you could

hear the roar. You were looking over your shoulder actually as the building was coming down. I don't know how long it took the building to come down, maybe ten seconds.

Then a huge cloud of I guess it was just smoke from the collapse itself shot out from I guess it was probably Vesey and behind Six World Trade. It was easily 20, 30 stories high, this cloud. It was like a jet airplane.

As you were running, you were watching the cloud catching up to you and you didn't know what was in this cloud. I saw I wasn't going to outrun it; I saw we weren't going to outrun it. I saw guys diving in behind cars because they knew they weren't going to outrun it.

You didn't know what was in it, if there was heat in it -- actually I was thinking there was going to be huge boulders coming down right down West Street and basically knock us over like bowling pins.

We probably got to 140 West, opposite 140 West, the telephone company building, around that area, and the cloud caught up to us and it just roared right past us. I kept running. I

didn't stop running because I said all right, the rest of it is going to come now, all the heavy stuff is coming.

We actually were able to make it -- we didn't stop running, myself and three members from my company. We stayed together, because I had seen the rest of the company ahead of us. Being the older guy, the young guys pretty much outsprinted me. They got into Stuyvesant High School, and I got into the vestibule of that. I didn't see any heavy debris following us down.

The second I realized that, the two guys that I was with, we immediately ran back down to the collapse zone. The first thought that was going through my head, I knew we had lost a lot of guys. I didn't know how many. I never imagined that we were going to lose this amount of guys.

Q. What happened to the chief that you had stopped? Did he --

A. Mark Ferran and Mike Hadden, from when they had left us, it was probably 30 seconds. They were one of my number one concerns, because I knew only one of them had a radio. As we went

down to the collapse zone, I bumped into Mark Ferran, the chief, and I was asking him if he had seen Mike. He said yeah, he had ran across towards the water with him, and he didn't know if he was all right.

At this time there was just about no traffic on the handy talkies. I started screaming into my handset for MikeHadden, hoping he would be near somebody with a radio and he would hear me calling him. That went on for a couple of minutes. I couldn't even tell you the time frame, to be honest with you.

Later on when I looked back and I saw actually how long we operated in the collapse zone, I wouldn't have thought we operated there as long as we did. Time kind of lost -- there was no concept of time.

I hooked up with Mark Ferran, and then we started to hear maydays over the radios from a number of firemen. Actually one of the ones that we heard was Chief Picciotto with 6 Truck. Mark Ferran was in direct communications with him.

Mark Ferran and then one of my members, actually Dennis Fischer, he was my control man.

He had radio. I switched over to Channel 5. Mark Ferran was switching over to Channel 5. No, Mark Ferran stayed on 1, I stayed on 5. Mark Ferran was going to get in touch with me. He was going to stay in touch with Dennis Fischer in case we found MikeHadden. Mark Ferran said he was going to go and start looking for Chief Picciotto because he heard his maydays now.

We were trying to keep a count of all our crew, at least.

Q. Did you lose any of your guys?

A. No, thank God we finally found Mike Hadden.

At that point Mikeand I teamed up -- we operated with 35 Engine. 24 Engine was pumping right in front of Six World Trade in the median there. We found another hydrant around the block that was still working, because at this time there were car fires.

There was a rig under the pedestrian walkway that connects three World Financial with six that had collapsed. We saw Rescue 1's rig there. We were doing searches of that. We were trying to get our lines stretched because

underneath the walkway there was a fire under there. There was a lot of different firemen walking around the area with really no direction.

(Interruption.)

A. We saw there were a couple guys who had a line also operating off 24. I ordered another line stretched off 24's engine. I set up one of my ECC's there. He made an air rate. We basically operated a line. Obviously it turned out for a while underneath the foot bridge at some of the car fires that were going.

I couldn't tell you the time elapsed. A DC showed up. I don't know who it was. He was asking us how we were making out with our searches. There was a parking ramp that went down. We went down into that as far as we could, and that was all collapsed in.

Q. Did you find any victims anywhere or anybody or did you help anybody out?

A. There were a number of firemen that were coming out of there. They were wandering around in the collapse zone and had obviously gotten hit real good. Who they were, I couldn't tell you. As we were going back into the

collapse zone, there were a number of firemen laying down. As we went by, we checked each guy and made sure that there was really no life-threatening injuries to them and could they get up and walk.

We operated in the collapse zone, as it turned out, for probably about four hours, four or five hours. In that area we actually were operating by the foot bridge and by Six World Trade for the whole time they were there. The devastation just that was in that area was incredible, but it didn't compare to actually what was on the other side of the foot bridge. That in itself was an awesome task. There weren't a lot of us operating there.

(Interruption.)

A. Like I said, we probably operated until about 2 or 3:00. I don't even remember the time. From the guys from 35 Engine you could see that they were pretty beat up. We were operating -- initially it was almost pitch-black when we got back down to the collapse zone. The collapse had happened, and we were back in the zone within a minute.

So everybody had had a hard time. We didn't have our masks with us. They all got left at the scene. I saw that everybody was pretty beat up, because we were stretching two and a halves. Everybody was kind of -- we were trying to do as much as we could. You didn't know if you were accomplishing anything because it was just -- it was an immense task, really, and you were trying to do whatever you could do.

Then I pulled us together and said let's go out and take a blow for 15, 20 minutes, see if we can get some water, because we were a mess, and we were going to come back into the collapse zone.

As we walked out towards West Street, we saw that the recall had been implemented. Basically once we got out, they weren't letting us back in. It seemed like they were waiting for the other building to come down too. What was that, Seven World Trade. Then we were pretty much out of the game for the rest of that time.

Q. You've covered everything. Anything World Trade Center can think of or want to add?

When you were responding in, what radio

frequencies were you on; do you remember? Were you on Manhattan?

A. Yeah, on Manhattan, yeah.

Q. Did you ever switch over --

A. No.

Q. -- to citywide?

A. No. When we got out, we just went right over. We didn't switch over.

MR. CASTORINA: Okay. The time is 11:55. This concludes the interview. Thank you.